

VZCZCXRO2124
RR RUEHROV
DE RUEHDJ #0551/01 1411125
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 211126Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0428
INFO IGAD COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000551

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E, PRM/AF, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/05/21
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPOW](#) [PBTS](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ICRC](#) [ER](#) [DJ](#)
SUBJECT: ICRC ON ERITREAN POWS IN DJIBOUTIAN CUSTODY

REF: DJIBOUTI 307

DJIBOUTI 00000551 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: J. Swan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

[¶1.](#) (C) SUMMARY. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), about half of the 19 Eritrean prisoners of war (POWs) captured by the GODJ during June 2008 hostilities along the Djibouti-Eritrea border have said that they do not/not want to return to Eritrea. A regional ICRC representative told Ambassador that while the POWs enjoyed good treatment and conditions, they were subject to increasing psychological stress over the uncertainty of their situation. Eritrea has flatly refused to work with ICRC or to acknowledge the existence of Djiboutian POWs. ICRC has nevertheless reminded the GODJ of its unilateral responsibility to release and repatriate the Eritrean POWs; but does not expect movement in this direction in the absence of any response at all from Eritrea. GODJ officials have fully cooperated with the ICRC to provide access to the POWs. END SUMMARY.

[¶2.](#) (C) Nairobi-based ICRC Head of Regional Delegation Christoph Luedi spoke with Ambassador May 20, during a three-day Djibouti visit. Luedi reported that the 19 Eritrean POWs at Djibouti's Nagad Detention Center were in good condition, but that ICRC had some questions about their risk for mental health problems due to continuing high levels of uncertainty about their situation. Ambassador noted that Congressman Payne, during an April trip to Djibouti, had visited the POWs and anecdotally noted that one or two seemed to be suffering from social withdrawal or other mental health problems (ref A). During each visit, ICRC allows every POW to make one phone call to family members. During ICRC's initial visit to the Eritrean POWs, each was also allowed to send one Red Cross Message (RCM); however, Luedi reported that the RCMs were still being held by the Government of Eritrea, and had not/not been delivered.

[¶3.](#) (C) Luedi said that in individual private interviews with each POW, an increasing number had told ICRC on this visit that they would not/not want to return to Eritrea. Luedi estimated that about half of the 19 were now expressing the wish to not/not return. Luedi said that he had noticed that POWs with larger families remaining in Eritrea were more likely to say they wanted to return, and said that he suspected this was due to fears about what pressures could be exerted on relatives back home should a POW decide not to repatriate.

[¶4.](#) (C) Luedi reported that Eritrea had completely rebuffed all ICRC approaches to discuss any Djiboutian POWs in Eritrean custody. All questions, Luedi said, were met not with "yes or no" but with a

"non-answer." However, Luedi said that ICRC believed that Eritrea was holding some Djiboutian POWs. (NOTE. Coincidentally, there are 19 Djiboutians missing in action since June 2008 hostilities broke out with Eritrea. END NOTE.) Despite total lack of progress in Eritrea, Luedi said that ICRC continued to remind the GODJ of its obligation to move toward release and repatriation of Eritrean POWs. Although he cited good cooperation from the GODJ in providing access to the POWs, Luedi told Ambassador that for the time being he did not/not expect any "movement" from the GODJ on releasing the 19.

15. (C) While Luedi's visit focused primarily on the 19 POWs, he said that ICRC had completed its annual comprehensive visit to Djibouti's Gabode Prison in early 2009, and would continue to make regular spot visits throughout the year. Luedi said that ICRC's initial impressions of the GODJ's newly established prison guard service were good. ICRC provided technical assistance to the GODJ to help train the new force, which Luedi said was a step "in the right direction." Luedi said that GODJ prison officials had shared with ICRC several ideas for prison improvement projects in the works, including plans to build a new cell block for female prisoners, and to develop training and education programs targeted at incarcerated women and minors.

16. (C) COMMENT. Resolving the stalemated Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute is a central GODJ priority. Although the GODJ is more broadly frustrated by the overall Eritrean unwillingness to move toward mediation or even acknowledge that any conflict occurred, the unknown fate of the presumed 19 Djiboutian POWs in Eritrean

DJIBOUTI 00000551 002.2 OF 002

custody remains a particularly raw Djiboutian grievance. END
COMMENT.
SWAN